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Negotiating national (non)belongings: Vietnamese Australians in ethno/multicultural Australia

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Abstract

Many immigrant-receiving countries are characterized by increasing multi-generational ethno-cultural diversity, with associated policies and discourses of inclusion. Yet they often simultaneously resist relinquishing narratives and practices grounded in idealized notions of ethno-cultural homogeneity. This results in the circulation of multiple, often competing, ideas of the nation, with significant implications for national (non)belonging among migrants and their descendants. Based on interviews with members of seven Vietnamese Australian families, this article explores their discursive navigation of two competing ideas of Australia: as ethno-cultural and multicultural. Applying a conceptual framework of belonging drawn from the burgeoning body of theory on the subject, this article demonstrates that, for migrants and their descendants, national (non)belonging is a dynamic and dialogic process of negotiating multiple national spheres, each governed by different politics and offering different possibilities for belonging. The multigenerational interview cohort additionally provides insights into the role of migration generation in mediating this process.

Keywords: national belonging, migration generations, Vietnamese Australian, multicultural, ethno-cultural

Introduction

While commonly represented as coherent fixed entities, nations are bounded by multiple, shifting borders (Yuval-Davis 2011). Defined variously by markers including geography, citizenship, ethnicity and autochthony, diverse ideas of the nation both intersect and compete for primacy in different contexts. In immigrant-receiving countries such as Australia, a key aspect of this is the production and circulation of competing ideas of the national subject and the national culture; ethnically and culturally diverse populations and the policies and discourses that support them co-exist with narratives and practices grounded in notions of homogeneity implicitly oriented to maintaining the hegemony of the dominant group (Hage 1998).ⁱ

The complex politics of belonging in such nations create an unstable terrain in which migrants and their descendants must continually renegotiate their location. The multiple national spheres in which their everyday lives are lived – bounded variously by formal citizenship, ethno-cultural similitude, and shared values – function according to different politics of inclusion and exclusion, with significant implications for people's location in the nation. While, in this transnational era, national belonging is no longer 'the hegemonic model of belonging' (Yuval-Davis 2011, 1) it was once considered to be, the nation's ongoing importance as the political, spatial and cultural context for many facets of life cannot be dismissed (Skey 2011; Carruthers 2002). There is need, however, for a more nuanced conceptualization of national belonging: both the multiple, competing ideas of the nation that structure relations of (non)belonging, and the ways in which they are constituted and negotiated.

Applying a conceptual framework of belonging drawn from the burgeoning body of theory on the subject (notably by Yuval-Davis 2011), this article attends to the dynamism and complexity of national (non)belonging for migrants and their descendants. Based on interviews conducted with members of different generations in seven Vietnamese Australian families, it explores how interviewees discursively construct, and position themselves within, two key national spheres: ethno-cultural and multicultural Australia. While sharing the same name, 'Australia', and the same political and geographical borders of citizenship and territory, these competing ideas of Australia demonstrate how the borders of national (non)belonging are differently constituted by different people and in different contexts (Yuval-Davis 2011). This

article thus reveals national (non)belonging to be a dialogic process involving the negotiation of multiple national spheres. It further demonstrates both the agency and dexterity with which migrants and their descendants negotiate their place in the nation, while also highlighting the politics of belonging that at times render their inclusion conditional and contextual.

This article additionally draws attention to the role of migration generation in the negotiation of national (non)belonging among migrants and their descendants: an under-examined factor in research on migrant belongings. Migration generation (wherein the migrant is a member of the first generation, their offspring the second generation, and so forth) is understood to mediate a range of practical and affective aspects of life that are likely to impact national belonging, including linguistic and cultural literacies and national and cultural identifications and attachments (Skrbis, Baldassar and Poynting 2007; Rumbaut 2004).

Conceptualising belonging

Despite its centrality to everyday life, and its frequent deployment in academic literature on topics including migration, ethnicity, and the nation (c.f. Nunn et al 2014), belonging is relatively under-theorized and ill-defined (May 2013; Antonsich 2010). It has, until recently, escaped the close scrutiny applied to the related concept of identity, which received sustained critical attention in the latter part of last century (c.f. Hall and Du Gay 1996; Rutherford 1990). While there has been mounting interest in belonging over the past two decades, intensifying in recent years, (c.f. Probyn 1996; Hage 1998; Fortier 2000; Yuval-Davis 2006; 2011; Antonsich 2010; May 2011; 2013), conceptual developments are yet to be widely applied to empirical research (Yuval-Davis 2011). In particular, empirical research rarely addresses the relation between personal or group belonging and the politics that govern it, a gap that this article seeks, in part, to address.

For individuals, belonging is broadly conceived of as feeling ‘at home’ (Yuval-Davis 2011, 2), experiencing a ‘sense of ease with oneself and one's surroundings’ (May 2011, 368). This ‘sense of belonging’ is often unconscious and seemingly natural, only emerging into focus when called into question (Yuval-Davis 2011; May 2011). Yet beyond this affective dimension, belonging can additionally, or alternately,

manifest formally (e.g. citizenship) and substantively (e.g. actively participating in a community). While belonging is generally conceptualized as a positive relation, it can also be experienced negatively as a burden or constraint. Conversely, non-belonging can be, at times, productive and creative (May 2011). People belong in different ways to multiple sites and collectivities, and at varying scales of experience, from neighbourhoods and clubs, to nations and diasporas (Antonsich 2010). Different belongings may be experienced with different degrees of intensity of desire and commitment (Probyn 1996), and diversely embodied, performed and signified (Fortier 2000). Moreover, these multiple belongings frequently intersect in both productive and challenging ways (Yuval-Davis 2011).

Belonging is inherently relational, negotiated through processes of seeking and granting, asserting and rejecting, in which individuals and groups have varying degrees of agency. Yuval-Davis (2011) describes this as the politics of belonging: the production and maintenance of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and of hierarchical relations within those boundaries – as well as their contestation. Different spheres of belonging have borders that are more or less porous or solid, flexible or rigid, mediating possibilities for inclusion (Yuval Davis 2011). The nature of these boundaries differs between spheres, and may be, for example, spatial, identificatory, or ethical. Politics of belonging additionally mediate the status of those within spheres, positioning individuals and groups in a hierarchy of (non)belonging (Back, Sinha, with Bryan 2012), and determining who may assert ‘governmental belonging’ over the sphere. As envisaged by Hage (1998, 55), governmental belonging confers ‘not only the position of cultural dominance within the field, but also...the power to position others within it’. Politics of belonging can play out interpersonally, structurally and representationally, and are dynamic across time and context (Antonsich 2010; Yuval Davis 2011; May 2011).

Context and methodology

The initial settlement of Vietnamese refugees in Australia, beginning in 1975, was ‘a touchstone for the demise of the White Australia policy’ (Viviani 1984, 54) that had previously circumscribed the ethnic and racial diversity of the nation (Tavan 2005), and a visible signal of the dawn of the new multicultural era. Today, approximately

one percent of Australians are of Vietnamese heritage, and the Vietnam-born are Australia's sixth largest immigrant group (ABS 2012; DIAC 2008). Vietnamese Australians occupy a dynamic location in the nation, having progressed from objects of suspicion and concern as non-English-speaking Asian refugees to increasingly active national subjects (Viviani 1984; 1996). Nonetheless, despite being established in Australia for four decades, Vietnamese Australians continue to experience a complex relationship with the nation, characterized by diverse and dynamic relations of (non)belonging.

The Vietnamese Australians whose ideas and experiences form the basis of this article were interviewed as part of a larger research project that utilized a mix of methods, including qualitative interviews, informal conversations and correspondence, and collaborative and arts-based practices, to explore generational change and intergenerational relations among Vietnamese Australians (Nunn 2012). Initially, seven Vietnamese Australian artists were recruited to work with the author on a range of arts-based research activities, selected based on their prior artistic work exploring issues of identity and belonging. The artists then assisted in recruiting members of their families who were invited to participate in an in-depth interview.

Twenty-two people were interviewed from across the seven families: 10 female and 11 male, ranging in age from 17 years to late-70s. Seven interviewees were members of the first generation, having migrated to Australia in adolescence or adulthood, four were members of the 1.5 generation (Rumbaut 2004) who migrated aged between 5 and 12 years of age, and ten were members of the second generation, either born in Australia or having migrated aged less than 5 years.ⁱⁱ Each family's settlement in Australia was precipitated by the Vietnam War and its aftermath, and all were based in Melbourne – a key site of Vietnamese settlement. Victoria, the state in which Melbourne is located, is home to 37% of Australia's Vietnam-born population (DIAC n.d.).

Interviews were carried out in English and Vietnamese (in the latter case with the assistance of a family member interpreterⁱⁱⁱ), digitally recorded and fully transcribed. Interviews centered on four key sites of intergenerational relations and generational change: remembering and narrating the past, cultural maintenance and change, homeland engagement, and (non)belonging in the settlement country. Interviews were treated as sites of self-representation (Bourdieu 1999), analyzed both discursively and

thematically. The use of both discourse and thematic analysis facilitated insights into interviewees' discursive constructions of Australian-ness, and how they rhetorically positioned themselves in this dynamic terrain. While the interview format provides limited insights into how national (non)belonging is *practically* negotiated, as an 'exceptional situation for communication, freed from the usual constraints...that weigh on most everyday interchanges' (Bourdieu 1999, 614), it is a productive context within which to elicit reflections and expressions of (non)belonging, which often evade explicit articulation.

All interviewees expressed a sense of belonging in Australia through the formal mechanism of citizenship, as well as a common sense of being 'at home', with all of the feelings of safety and familiarity that this implies (Hage 1998). When constituting the nation and their location within it, however, they frequently invoked two distinct ideas of Australia: as ethno-cultural and multicultural. The former is grounded in perceptions of the ongoing hegemony of whiteness and of Anglo Australian values and practices, while the latter emerges out of policy, discourse and demography. Both stemming from political projects of nation building – though many decades apart – these competing ideas of Australia continue to be reproduced through representation and discourse, including arts, media, and politics, as well as through the lived experience of the everyday and the local (Elder 2007; Anderson and Taylor 2005).

(Non)belonging in ethno-cultural Australia

Given its ambivalent location as a 'white nation' (Hage 1998) in Asia, and reflecting the racialized thinking of the time, from the moment of its inception Australia as a nation state was preoccupied with race. One of the first acts passed by the federal parliament was the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901), which prohibited immigration by non-European and non-white people. Known as the White Australia Policy, it remained in place until 1972, though it was gradually weakened in response to drives to increase Australia's population and to changing ideas of race (Tavan 2005; Ang 2001). Today its legacy continues through the proliferation of 'dominant narratives of Australian-ness [that] presume a real Australian to be someone with British heritage' (Elder 2007, 115), and through the perpetuation of an Anglo Australian 'ethnocracy'

(Yuval-Davis 2011, 88) that maintains a firm, though slowly loosening, grip on ‘power, resources, and symbolic belonging’.

Premised on cultural and ethnic similitude – a ‘rhetoric of sameness’ – (Antonsich 2010, 650), inclusion in this national sphere requires the embodiment and performance of a shared Australian ethno-cultural identity. It therefore presents a challenge to migrants and their descendants, and particularly those whose phenotypical characteristics are often read as markers of both ethnic and cultural otherness. There is, however, some porosity in its borders. According to Hage (1998), ethno-cultural Australian-ness can be ‘accumulated’ to varying degrees through the adoption of valued characteristics and dispositions such as language, accent, bodily praxis, and modes of sociality. Yet the ability to accumulate national belonging and to have it recognized is unevenly distributed, mediated by factors including race, gender and class. Further, given their propensity to more quickly adapt to the host society (Nguyen 2008; Rosenthal, Ranieri and Klimidis 1996), it is more likely to benefit members of the second and 1.5 migration generations than the first.

The ongoing pervasiveness of Australian-ness as an ethno-cultural category is reflected in its prevalence in interviewees’ accounts. Yet articulations of this category varied, giving differing emphasis to either ethnicity or culture, and resulting in shifting perceptions of the ability of migrants and their descendants to belong within it. Further, while Anglo Australian-ness was generally represented as a hegemonic category, it was also identified at times as one of a number of ethnic and cultural categories that constitute Australia.

The invocation of Anglo Australian-ness as a hegemonic category is exemplified in the following statement by thirty-six year old, second generation Trina Le:

I feel stupid saying that I’m Australian...Because I clearly look Vietnamese... Until the generations after us forget what Australians originally really were, no one will ever really fit into that “I’m Australian” unless they’re white.

In this account, visible ethnicity is the primary marker of Australian belonging. Yet Trina’s statement also suggests that it is a marker of a white Australian past that will eventually be forgotten. Its waning dominance was reflected in a number of accounts in which Australian-ness was not articulated as the normative ethnic orientation, but

as one ethnicity among many in the social worlds of interviewees. Minh Lam, a fifty year-old first generation male, explained, for example, how ‘nearly fifty per cent of my friends [are] Australians, and the other just a mix’.

A number of 1.5 and second generation interviewees additionally deployed Australian as a cultural orientation, often in the colloquial form of ‘Aussie’. While, in many cases, this cultural usage was intrinsically connected to ethnicity, interviewees also, at times, ascribed it to themselves and to other non-Anglo Australians. In this vein, thirty-six year-old 1.5 generation Loan Vu remarked of her infant son: ‘he will probably be more Aussie than anybody’. Throughout the interviews, these intersecting ideas of Australian – as ethnicity and culture – were in constant flux, reflecting the dynamism of this sphere of belonging and ongoing contestations over its borders.

Accumulating national belonging

Interviewees’ discussions of their own relation to ethno-cultural Australian-ness frequently supported Hage’s suggestion that national belonging can be accumulated. Yet they also marked the limits of this process. Even amongst those second generation interviewees who at times positioned themselves as ‘Aussie’, articulations of Australian ethno-cultural belonging were always circumscribed. Simon Le described himself and his brothers as ‘Aussie *in a way*’, and twenty-four year-old Elizabeth Do said of her upbringing: ‘I think we were *like* an Aussie family’.

Accumulation of Australian-ness was understood by many interviewees to be the outcome of particular forms of interaction with wider Australian society. These included professional and personal relationships with Anglo Australians, which, through intimate everyday contact, facilitated a sense of Australian cultural belonging. Thirty year-old, 1.5 generation male Hien Nguyen explained:

Within my family I see myself being more Australian than my brother and sisters, all of them, because of the circle of friends and the industry I work in, and because of being with [my Anglo Australian wife]...Having these accesses to other Australian families and lifestyles on a more intimate level, and also professional level... I have an understanding, or maybe [I have] even unconsciously adopted certain traits, habits, behaviour...

Reflecting the dialogic nature of belonging as something that is both asserted and granted (Yuval-Davis 2011), several interviewees identified intermarriage as influencing the way a person is perceived by others, providing a whiteness-by-association that locates one more securely within the nation. Speaking about racism, second generation Trina Le said: ‘I don’t get it that often...and that’s maybe because I’m married to a “Skippy”^{iv}’ ... If I wasn’t, I think anywhere I’d go, where I walked, people would look at me differently’. In this account, intermarriage represents an accumulation of national cultural belonging not only through access and habituation to Anglo Australian norms, but also as a signal to others of integration into (Anglo) Australian society.

Practical and symbolic exclusion

While the above accounts testify to an accumulation of ethno-cultural belonging by many interviewees, its benefit as a form of ‘national capital’ (Hage 1998, 228) is reliant on its recognition by others; a process impeded by the varying forms of practical and symbolic exclusion to which interviewees narrated being subject.

For a number of first generation – and especially elderly and female – interviewees, the most significant barrier they identified to engaging with the wider Australian community was poor English literacy (see also Lange and Nisbet 2000). This is particularly critical because, in addition to impeding access to interpersonal communication and to representational domains such as media and entertainment, language confers agency; it allows people ‘to *choose* how and to what degree [they] will interact with Australian society’ (Viviani 1984, 197, emphasis in original). Hien’s mother, fifty-seven year-old, first generation Thao Nguyen, migrated to Australia as a single parent and was subsequently employed in home-based sewing ‘outwork’, inhibiting her access to the Australian ethno-cultural sphere. While she expressed a strong sense of belonging in Australia she reported, in stark contrast to her son: ‘I don’t have a lot of interaction with Australian culture, or understanding through language’.

For members of the 1.5 and second generations, barriers to ethno-cultural belonging were more likely to be symbolic. This was particularly true in relation to representational spheres, in which the frequent conflation of race/ethnicity with

culture reinforces the centrality of Anglo Australian-ness/whiteness (and often male-ness) in the national imaginary (Nicol 1999). The continuing power and prevalence of such representations is evidenced in their invocation by a number of second generation interviewees as constitutive of Australian-ness, even as they were simultaneously rejected or debunked. Second generation young adult Robert Le articulated it as follows:

Oh, if you say Aussie, like *I know these aren't Aussies*, but the first thing that comes in the picture is like some guy wearing one of those brim hats...in one of those bogan tops, in shorts, work boots, holding a VB. That's what comes into my head, *but I know it's not that*.

It is telling that, while at other times Robert expressed a sense of ethno-cultural Australian belonging, when providing a description of 'Aussies' he reverted to a stereotypical representation that, as he acknowledged, bears little relation to the Australia he inhabits. This representational hegemony of whiteness, and its likelihood to continue into the future, was widely noted by interviewees. When Robert's brother Steven was asked about the potential for a future in which Australian-ness would not be equated with whiteness, he responded: 'They'll always want the white image. They'll always want the white'.

Resistance and rejection

Although Thao and Robert's accounts demonstrate how the ethno-cultural belonging of migrants and their descendants can be both practically and symbolically curtailed, it was also common for interviewees to actively reject belonging in this sphere. Moreover, practices of resistance and experiences of exclusion were at times interrelated. For as Hage (2003, 99) observes: 'I cannot possibly relate to a social milieu to which I feel I owe nothing, or only negativity'.

Highlighting the importance of agency in processes of (non)belonging, a number of interviewees expressed resistance to Australian ethno-cultural belonging. Notably, several second generation interviewees criticized facets of Australian culture they perceived to be discriminatory – especially where this reinforced their own marginality. Second generation, thirty-three year-old Pete Le, for example, rejected what he perceived as the 'xenophobia that can be a part of really traditional or older

histories of Australian-ness', suggesting that 'those values that stem from there...are still...concurrent underneath a lot of Australian mentality'.

In many accounts, negative facets of Australian-ness were constituted in contrast to valued facets of Vietnamese culture, often accompanied by a rhetorical reorientation of cultural belonging toward Vietnamese-ness. While 1.5 generation Loan Vu at times during her interview positioned herself in the national *we*, when it came to expressing negative facets of ethno-cultural Australian-ness she distanced herself from Australians, who in such contexts were not *we* but *they*:

[T]hey don't get together as often as...Asians do...*They're* not as united, some families I've seen. *They're* quite lonely. I know because, being in pharmacy, I see a lot of – especially the older people – and they only see their kids like once or twice a year...So I see that and I'm thinking, you know, in *our* culture there's no way we would let *our* parents be on their own...especially on special occasions.

While, as Hien Nguyen explained above, access can facilitate accumulation of ethno-cultural belonging, in Loan's case it led her to reject what she regarded as a negative facet of Australian-ness, and through her discursive positioning of Australians as *they*, to position herself outside of the ethno-cultural Australian sphere more broadly.

Despite the plentiful and diverse representations of Australian culture expressed by interviewees, several members of the 1.5 and second generations also asserted that Australians 'don't have any culture at all', or 'it's not very deep or anything' (Steven Le, second generation). This discourse of Australia as culturally impoverished (though often tempered by discussion of multiculturalism) served in many accounts to position Vietnamese culture as superior to Australian culture by virtue of its depth and duration. Regardless of the veracity of such claims, they functioned to challenge the value of Australian ethno-cultural belonging.

Belonging at the borders?

More than four decades after the demise of the White Australia policy, ethno-cultural Australia remains a highly politicized sphere of national (non)belonging. Its borders of inclusion have expanded over time with the diversification of the population and the 'de-emphasizing' of ethnicity in public discourse (Moran 2011), providing greater

opportunities for cultural belonging among non-Anglo Australians. However, interviewees' accounts demonstrate that the relative emphasis on ethnicity or culture varies across contexts, mediating possibilities for belonging. While ethno-cultural belonging can be accumulated to some extent, it is always constrained by the naturalized notion of Anglo Australians as the normative national subjects.

Among interviewees, migration generation appeared to be an important mediating factor in ethno-cultural (non)belonging. Members of the first generation were more likely to experience practical exclusion, with often-limited access to the Anglo Australian sphere and the representations and discourses that both reflect and constitute it. This limited access also meant they were less likely to perceive themselves to have accumulated ethno-cultural capital. While 1.5 and second generation interviewees didn't report the same degree of practical exclusion as members of the first generation, and were more likely to accumulate markers of ethno-cultural belonging, their literacy in this sphere meant they were more highly attuned to processes of symbolic exclusion. The accounts of the Vietnamese Australians in this study suggest that while people may choose not to belong to ethno-cultural Australia, or may choose to accumulate a high level of cultural belonging, they cannot choose to belong unconditionally. They generally perceive themselves to be bound by ethnicity to remain at the margins of the ethno-cultural nation.

Despite its persistence as a sphere of national belonging – and particularly its ongoing representational hegemony – interviewees' accounts suggest that the value of ethno-cultural Australian-ness is also contested. Interviewees regarded it at times as just one among many ways of being Australian, and at other times rejected it in favour of Vietnamese-ness. In discursively constructing the borders of ethno-cultural belonging according to perceptions of intra-group commonality and inter-group difference (Barth 1994), interviewees frequently produced an artificially rigid binary between Australian-ness and other ethnic identifications, reifying discourses of mutual otherness that are not necessarily borne out in practice. Yet the shifting *we* exemplified in Loan Vu's account demonstrates that ethno-cultural boundaries can be crossed, as 1.5 and second generations interviewees in particular sought, in different contexts, to rhetorically align themselves with either, or both, Vietnamese-ness and Australian-ness.

(Non)belonging in multicultural Australia

Following the abolition of the racialized immigration policies of White Australia in 1972, an official policy of multiculturalism was introduced. Primarily oriented to the immigrant first generation, multiculturalism initially focused on processes of recognition and inclusion, supporting cultural maintenance while still maintaining ‘the supremacy of existing institutions and values as well as of the English language’ (Jupp 2002, 84). Perhaps responding to the increasing presence of multigenerational ethnic communities, more recent incarnations of the policy emphasize broader processes of valuing cultural diversity, promoting understanding, and opposing intolerance (DIAC 2011).

While multiculturalism originated as a policy, it is commonly invoked as a descriptor of Australia’s ethnic and cultural diversity. Yet beyond this demographic reality, multiculturalism is widely regarded as having failed to de-centre Anglo-Australian-ness (Ang 2001; Hage 1998). Such critiques often fail themselves, however, to recognize how migrants and their descendants utilize multiculturalism as a discursive site of Australian belonging (Pardy and Lee 2011). Discourses of multicultural belonging are supported by people’s lived experiences of ‘everyday multiculturalism’ (Wise and Velayutham 2009) in culturally diverse suburbs and towns in which having a recent migrant heritage is the norm (Butcher and Thomas 2003).

Multiculturalism, in its everyday sense, is a flexible and porous sphere of national belonging, inclusive of all who share its ethos. Its limits are not marked by rigid borders, but by the contingency of its recognition as a legitimate mode of national belonging. These borders manifest spatially, through multiculturalism’s uneven distribution – as demography and ethos – across the national space, and more crucially, they manifest politically. The Howard Government’s ‘rolling back’ (Poynting 2008 p. 5) of multiculturalism during their time in leadership, as well as multiculturalism’s European decline, demonstrate that, at the level of policy and official discourse, it can be taken away.

Throughout interviewees’ accounts, multiculturalism was expressed variously – and simultaneously – as policy, demography, and ethos. It was also an important sphere for identity negotiations, and, for many, provided an important discursive site of belonging. It was most commonly invoked by 1.5 and second generation interviewees,

though first generation accounts at times reflected multicultural policy and discourse. Where interviewees explicitly used the term ‘multicultural’, it was primarily as a descriptor of Australian society, often in opposition to the ethno-cultural nation:

[Australia] can’t develop one [identity] because we’re too multicultural now. So I think we’re just going to grow up accepting all the different cultures, and whichever one you practice, well that’s good for you.

Because how can you make one out of so many?

1.5 generation Loan Vu thus highlighted the futility of ethno-cultural conceptions of Australian-ness in the face of the nation’s culturally diverse demography, while also espousing the inclusive multicultural ethos of a national *we* that is not premised on a shared identity.

The adjective ‘multicultural’ was additionally used by some interviewees in relation to places (Hien Nguyen grew up in a ‘very multicultural suburb’), for groups of people who are culturally diverse (Simon Le discussed how Australia has ‘heaps of different multicultural people’), and even as a disposition toward diversity. Trina Le spoke of those who profess support for multiculturalism, but whose discourse or practice implies otherwise: ‘they say they’re multicultural, but they’re not. And if they make a big show of being multicultural then obviously there is something wrong there’.

Spatialized belongings

Given the underrepresentation of multiculturalism in many representational sites, interviewees’ ideas of Australia as multicultural were largely drawn from experience, and frequently grounded in the local spaces within which ‘qualitative determinations over national belonging are experienced, enacted, ordered, and resisted’ (Anderson and Taylor 2005, 474). While many interviewees identified Australia as a multicultural nation generally, a number of accounts demonstrated that specific places in the nation can be understood to be more or less multicultural, such that, despite a nationwide *policy* of multiculturalism, multiculturalism as *demography* and *ethos* is unevenly distributed. This most frequently manifested as an urban/rural divide, with interviewees expressing a greater sense of belonging in cities, ‘where there’s so much more multiculturalism going on’ (Pete Le, second generation male).

For several interviewees, the degree of multiculturalism in a particular place (measured by perceptions of ethnic diversity) was directly correlated to sense of belonging. Second generation Mai Dang noted:

Whenever I'm in small towns that have no other Asians, I feel very conspicuous. I do notice if I'm in a room that's only full of white men, then I just go, "oh, where's the exit?" So, yeah, I do notice when there's no other visible ethnicity around and I'm the only one.

It is noteworthy here that Mai emphasizes the intersection of race and gender (Yuval-Davis 2011), feeling most uncomfortable with white men.

The uneven distribution of multiculturalism means that, for the Vietnamese Australians in this study, the boundaries of national (non)belonging are redrawn in different places and contexts. Second generation Trina Le's resistance to taking up her (Anglo Australian) husband's suggestion to go camping in a small beachside town reveals the complexities of such determinations:

...if I go to an international resort, or if I go to a much more popular resort...there's people from all over the world coming, there's people from all over Australia going...I would not feel out of place there... [If I did go camping] I'm pretty sure that everything will be fine – no one would say anything. I'm not saying anyone would be rude or anything like that. But there's always that fear that – 'cause it's happened before – that someone will say something and you go: "that's not quite right". And I'm sure they wouldn't have meant anything by it, but I don't particularly want to be in the company of people who are ignorant to our multicultural society.

In Trina's account, the difference between these two holiday destinations is measured not only by the ethnic diversity of the people she expects will be there, but also by suppositions about the presence or absence of a multicultural ethos. Trina's discomfort with the idea of camping is not a measure of her own national (non)belonging, however, but of the 'ignorance' of those who do not share her understanding of contemporary Australia and may, implicitly or explicitly, question her belonging on those grounds.

Producing cultural identities in multicultural Australia

While interviewees shared a sense of multicultural belonging in Australia, the flexibility of this sphere as a shared *ethos*, rather than a shared *identity*, meant that it was constituted in diverse ways. These ranged from the conventional (and critiqued) notion of multiculturalism in which differences are classified ‘into a neat, virtual grid of distinct “ethnic communities”, each with their own “culture”’ (Ang 2001, 14) to identity formations that transgressed such boundaries.

For many first generation interviewees, multiculturalism underpinned their belonging in Australia as Vietnamese people, providing the policy context for ethno-cultural identity maintenance. This is particularly important for forced migrants who, having lost their homeland, may experience cultural maintenance as the primary mode of (re)producing Vietnamese identities (Thomas 1999). Reflecting on his parents’ ideas and experiences, second generation Pete Le identified this form of first generation belonging as being *Vietnamese in Australia*, as differentiated from being *Vietnamese Australian*. In this formulation of multiculturalism, the emphasis is on the formal mechanisms of the state to provide rights and opportunities within a multicultural environment that both practically and politically supports ongoing identification as Vietnamese. Exemplifying this perspective, Thao Nguyen said she ‘would like the Australian community to see Vietnamese people as Australians, but also having their own cultural differences’.

For many 1.5 and second generation interviewees, the boundary between Vietnamese and Australian was less clear. While, as we have seen, interviewees from these generations often discursively reproduced the cultural categories that are reified in conventional notions of multiculturalism, they also frequently subverted them, traversing their borders or refusing to recognize them. In many instances this demonstrated interviewees’ agency in constituting their own identities. Yet it also reflected the politics of belonging to both Vietnamese and Australian spheres (Butcher 2008; Ang 2001), and the marginality of this group within both. As 1.5 generation Loan Vu summarized it: ‘if we’re at home, we have to be more Vietnamese so that we can please our parents...then at work you have to do what society expects of you’.

Nonetheless, second generation interviewees in particular asserted their agency in this process. Thirty-seven year-old second generation Mai Dang felt, for example, that she

was able to ‘pick and choose’ her cultural identifications despite such pressures. It was something she felt people could do:

...once you’re self-aware enough to identify what cultural forces affect you and what cultural forces are unconscious in you, and raising them to a level where you can choose it rather than feel obligated to be a certain way.

This cultural mobility was also deployed to challenge ethno-cultural categories as discrete spheres of belonging. Two interviewees spoke of transgressing these categories, though in strikingly different ways. Thirty-four year-old, 1.5 generation Quoc Vu discussed forging his own dynamic cultural path:

I guess I’ve always seen my life, at least since my late teens, as a kind of attempt to redefine culture in terms of...my own lived culture. So yeah, it’s this kind of work in progress that is always that conversation about what has meaning to me now, or what is useful.

In contrast to Quoc’s conscious process of cultural engagement, twenty year-old, second generation Lien Dang evaded categorization through the seemingly unreflexive practice of ‘being herself’:

Like I don’t really think of myself as Australian. I probably am Australian, but I don’t really think like that. I don’t really label it. I just, I’m just – I am who I am really. I just don’t really think, “oh, I’m Asian, Vietnamese”... I’m just – I am who I am and I don’t really compare myself to a label.

In their different ways, Quoc and Lien modelled modes of identity construction that refused to orient themselves to rigid ethno-cultural spheres. In doing so, they performed a challenge both to these categories and to conventional ideas of multiculturalism.

‘Where are you from?’

National belonging is not, however, a one-way process. While many of the Vietnamese Australians in this study felt confident about their location in the multicultural nation, they nonetheless encountered challenges to this belonging. One

of the most common ways in which occurred was through the question: ‘where are you from?’ An interpersonal manifestation of the tension between the ethno-cultural and multicultural spheres, this question contains the explicit assumption that to bear the aural or visual markers of a non-Anglo Australian heritage is to be *from* somewhere else (Zevallos 2008; Ang 2001; Thomas 1999).

While 1.5 generation Loan Vu said she did not mind answering the question, she experienced it as a perpetual reminder of the limits of her Australian belonging:

I always feel that I am more Vietnamese than I am Australian, even though I speak English really well. And I also get reminded all the time because people always ask: “where are you from?” But then I think, “hang on, I’m here now”.

Thus while Loan identified strongly as Vietnamese, she resisted being continually positioned as such by others.

For other interviewees, being asked ‘where are you from?’ was at times experienced as an encounter with ignorance rather than an unsettling of their own position (Tan 2006). Second generation Trina Le said she generally fielded this question within a culturally diverse corporate environment in which she perceived people to be respectful of coworkers’ ethno-cultural backgrounds. She was, however, attuned to more pejorative inquiries. In those instances, she reported: ‘I know that they’re an idiot and it doesn’t really matter what I tell them.’

Like Trina, a number of people discussed the question ‘where are you from?’ in the context of a multicultural Australia where, as Hien Nguyen noted, everyone has ‘a background’. He thus regarded it as ‘just a very normal question and logical question’. Similarly, for second generation Simon Le, being asked where you are from need not imply that you are not, simultaneously, ‘from’ Australia: ‘I say I’m Vietnamese. ‘Cause obviously they’re asking you – obviously you’re Australian’. For thirty-five year-old, Zachary Simpson, however, who as a Vietnam-born adoptee is unable to ‘say that [he’s] from Vietnam with the same confidence’ that those from Vietnamese families can, the question is profoundly unsettling. Even discussing the question in the interview elicited frustration as he provided his emotional response: ‘Don’t give me shit about not being fucking Aussie’.

Re-forming multiculturalism

Though originating as policy, multiculturalism also operates discursively and practically as a demographic reality and a shared ethos. While its borders – as both demography and ethos – at times manifest spatially, its basis as a collective orientation to diversity, rather than a shared identity, means that multiculturalism is a flexible and porous sphere of national (non)belonging. And while its legitimacy is at times contested in policy and practice, it retains significant discursive power as a sphere in which migrants and their descendants can assert national belonging. Interviewees variously utilized it as a discourse of inclusion, a challenge to the hegemony of ethno-cultural categories, and an umbrella for a diversity of emerging identities and practices.

The flexibility of multiculturalism as a sphere of national (non)belonging is reflected in the different ways in which it was constituted and experienced by different interviewees, and notably by members of different generations. As a sphere that welcomes rather than competes with ethno-cultural attachments, multiculturalism allowed members of the first generation to simultaneously claim Australian national belonging and Vietnamese ethno-cultural belonging, the former politically and practically supporting the latter. In contrast, for members of the 1.5 and second generations, many of whom experienced marginality in Australian and Vietnamese ethno-cultural spheres, the multicultural national sphere provided a practical and discursive space in which they could translate the limitation of ‘in-between-ness’ (Butcher and Thomas 2003) into the asset of cultural mobility; an attribute that places them at the heart of the contemporary multicultural nation (Ang 2001).

As the uneven spatial distribution of multiculturalism and some incarnations of ‘where are you from?’ illustrate, multiculturalism doesn’t protect people from experiencing practical and symbolic challenges to their national belonging. Despite this, interviewees – and especially those from the 1.5 and second generations – expressed a confidence in their belonging in multicultural Australia that was not easily undermined. For at least one participant, Trina, this confidence manifested as a sense of governmental belonging, empowering her to define the boundaries of belonging and to position others in relation to them (Hage 1998).

Divergent boundaries, dynamic belongings

Utilizing a conceptual framework drawn from the burgeoning body of theory on belonging, and focusing in particular on the interface between its personal and political dimensions, this article presents a nuanced account of the complexity and dynamism of discursive negotiations of national (non)belonging across generations in Vietnamese Australian families. The interrelated ideas of Australia as ethno-culturally Anglo and as multicultural provide the complex terrain in which these negotiations take place. Further, ethno-cultural Australia can be understood as more or less ethnic or cultural, and multiculturalism can variously refer to policy, demography and ethos, such that even these two competing ideas of Australian-ness are highly unstable. Sharing the same moniker of ‘Australian’, they nonetheless function according to profoundly different politics. While the former is premised on ethno-cultural similitude, marking firm though permeable boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, the latter, based on a shared ethos, is more porous and flexible, facilitating diverse articulations and experiences of belonging. Yet the two are not mutually exclusive. They co-exist and intersect, each claiming primacy in different contexts, and people continue to negotiate them both – discursively and practically – on a daily basis.

The politics of belonging in these different spheres are rendered through policies and structures, representations and symbols, and everyday interpersonal relations and local contexts. Their differences, as presented in interviewees’ accounts, had significant implications for how national (non)belonging was perceived. Moreover, interviewees’ modes of belonging in both spheres were informed by migration generation.

Migration generation mediated, at times, how people discursively constituted ethno- and multicultural spheres of national (non)belonging and located themselves and others in relation to them. It also informed their perceptions of their capacity to belong, their desire to do so, and their recognition by others. In particular, migration generation influenced interviewees’ ability to accumulate valued national characteristics and to access the Anglo ethno-cultural sphere, and informed how multiculturalism was understood and utilized in identity formation.

While most evident among members of the 1.5 and second generations, interviewees of all generations demonstrated their creativity and dexterity in negotiating their place in Australia. They did so through processes of accumulation and rejection of ethno-cultural belonging, and through various modes of utilizing, adapting, and challenging

the discourse of multiculturalism. They remained susceptible, however, to having their national belonging unsettled in both spheres. Their belonging in ethno-cultural Australia was subject to forms of practical and symbolic exclusion, while multiculturalism was seen as unevenly distributed across the nation, and itself occupies a contestable location as a site of national belonging. Despite this, invocations of a multicultural sphere defined by a shared ethos that transcends identity highlight the existence of, and the possibilities for, a more flexible, inclusive belonging. One that is open to multiple imaginings of the nation from across and within different ethno-cultural groups.

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ⁱ While the focus of this paper is on the interaction between migrants and their descendants and the majority community, contestations over national belonging also frequently involve the autochthonic claims of colonized groups, such as indigenous Australians.

ⁱⁱ An additional participant, the non-Vietnamese adoptive sister of one of the artists, was part of the broader project but is not included in the analysis for this article.

ⁱⁱⁱ While family member interpreting is not widely used in research, it is an everyday practice in many migrant families. This mode of 'natural translation' (Harris and Sherwood (1978), quoted in Orellana, Dorner and Pulido 2003) provides a range of opportunities and benefits for research, albeit with concomitant challenges. See Nunn (2012) for further discussion of this practice.

^{iv} Skippy is the titular character of the 1960s Australian television program *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*. Colloquially, the term refers to Anglo Australians.